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### Recurrence of sickness absence

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# Appendices A



## Appendix 1

### Sickness absence statistics

The data relating to the period 1997–2003 were obtained from the Statistics for Sickness Absence in Private Companies, consisting of some 17 000 companies and institutions (Statistics Netherlands).<sup>1</sup> The departments of public administration and education are not included in these statistics. Moreover, the figures apply to sickness absence for a maximum of one year.

The figures for 2004 and 2005 have been calculated on the basis of the National Absence Statistics and the aggregate data for the branches of agriculture and fishing, financial institutions, health care and education. These contain all sickness absence records for workers who are registered with these services. These records combined cover approximately 75% of the working population in the Netherlands. Statistics Netherlands combines these data with data from the basic municipal administration and from surveys. However, in recent years this 75% coverage has decreased to approximately 60% due to changes in legislation. The figures for 2004 concern sickness absence for a maximum of one year, but since 2005 the figures also include sickness absence for longer than one year.

The figures for 2006 and 2007 are based on annual surveys. The 2006 sickness absence figures for agriculture and fishing, health care and education are aggregated branch data.

From 2008 onwards, the sickness absence data are obtained from the Quarterly Sickness Absence Survey (KZV). This quarterly survey has replaced the annual sickness absence surveys and the National Absence Statistics (NVS). The KZV survey is sent to approximately 25,000 companies and institutions. The survey form only asks for the percentage of sickness absence in the company or institution in the past quarter. Approximately 18 000 companies respond to the KZV survey, providing data on approximately 2.5 million employees. Unlike the NVS, the KZV provided no data on sickness absence in relation to personal characteristics, the duration of the sickness absence or the absence frequency. Since this is a random sample survey, there is a margin of inaccuracy in the KZV data. This margin is approximately 0.06 of the total, but at a lower level the margin is greater.



## Appendix 2

### Sickness absence percentage and sickness absence frequency in the Post and Telecommunication companies during the study period

**Table 1** shows the sickness absence percentage and frequency in the Post and Telecommunication companies from 1997 to 2007. The sickness absence percentage is defined as the total number of absence days in calendar days, adjusted for partial return to work, divided by the total number of employee years \* 365 (or 366 in a leap-year). The number of employee years is calculated by adding up for each employee the number of calendar days in the months employed, divided by 365 (or 366 in a leap-year). Sickness absence ends after one year of illness and when an employee has been absent for more than one year this no longer contributes to the employee years. The sickness absence frequency is defined as the total number of periods of absence that started in a year, divided by the total number of employee years.

**Table 1** Sickness absence in the study population

	Employee years		Absence percentage		Absence frequency		National statistics <sup>3</sup>
	Telecom <sup>1</sup>	Post <sup>2</sup>	Telecom <sup>1</sup>	Post <sup>2</sup>	Telecom <sup>1</sup>	Post <sup>2</sup>	
<b>1997</b>	32 467	55 653	4.6%	4.7%	1.50	1.37	4.6%
<b>1998</b>	33 678	59 519	5.3%	5.3%	1.53	1.39	5.0%
<b>1999</b>	34 771	62 221	6.1%	5.7%	1.50	1.45	5.4%
<b>2000</b>	36 276	63 868	6.5%	6.5%	1.53	1.43	5.5%
<b>2001</b>	34 749	41 467	6.5%	6.3%	1.51	1.34	5.4%
<b>2002</b>	23 374	44 406	5.8%	5.4%	1.31	1.28	5.4%
<b>2003</b>	19 629	46 166	4.8%	4.9%	1.30	1.25	4.8%
<b>2004</b>	19 091	44 221	4.3%	4.6%	1.22	1.20	4.3%
<b>2005</b>	-	41 077	-	4.6%	-	1.21	4.3 %
<b>2006</b>	-	38 223	-	4.3%	-	1.17	4.4 %
<b>2007</b>	-	36 752	-	4.3%	-	1.18	4.4 %

<sup>1</sup> The Telecom company left our occupational health service in 2005. Callcenters are included until 2002.

<sup>2</sup> One third of the Post companies left our occupational health service in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Public sector not included.

In the study population, the sickness absence percentage increased from 4.6%–4.7% in 1997 to 6.3%–6.5% in 2001. This is a sharper increase than the national Dutch trend which increased from 4.6%–5.4%.<sup>1</sup> After 2002 the figures are comparable with the national statistics.



## **Appendix 3**

### **Developments within the Post and Telecommunication companies during the study period (1997–2007)**

#### **Post companies**

The main tasks in the Post companies are the sorting and delivery of mail, and the company is divided into sorting centers and distribution.

#### ***Sorting centers***

In 1998 the 12 forwarding junctions were reorganized into 7 sorting centers. Many employees were unhappy with the changes which resulted from this reorganization. The work processes have been changed and the new sorting machines that have been introduced imposed a heavier physical burden. Having to work with these machines not only resulted in physical complaints, but also in mental opposition. Many employees feel that the atmosphere had become more performance-oriented and that the standards are higher.

This reorganization has also influenced the management, which has focused intensely on changing the production process. In some cases there was also a shortage of personnel in this section, which increased the burden of work for the management. This has also influenced the communication between the employees and the management, making the management much less approachable for the employees.

#### ***Distribution***

Turnover in the Post companies used to be low, but this changed during the study period, due to changes in the working situation. The standard has shifted, and the postmen now have to cover greater areas. Moreover, they now operate in teams. This implies, among other things, that there is a rotation in the delivery areas, and this increases the pressure of the work. Previously one postman would deliver post in the same area for years. By introducing teamwork, problems are also expected to be solved within the group, but this does not always work. Now that the postmen no longer sort the post themselves, there is much less variation in work, and in some cases the management has become more stringent.

Since 2005, the postmen have slowly been replaced by mail carriers. In 2005, 10% of the employees were mail carriers, and in 2007 this had increased to 16%. The aim is thus to keep up with the competition in the postal market. Mail carriers have an employment contract for a maximum of 15 hours a week, and their Collective Labour Agreement differs from that of postmen. Their wages are slightly higher than the



legal minimum wage. Mail carriers are mainly people who are returning to work, ex-receivers of a disability allowance, and housewives. Most of them are women between 35 and 54 years of age. There is a high turnover, which is over 60% in some areas. In recent years sickness absence among mail carriers has been increasing: from 3.9% in 2005 to 4.4% in 2007.

### **Telecommunication companies**

The cause of the increase of sickness absence in the Telecommunication companies is mainly due to the “new KPN” reorganization in 1999, in which a shift from 13 geographical districts to 5 business units took place. Instead of forming more or less autonomous districts, the organization is divided into business units, sales sections, and production sections, supported by a number of staff departments and municipal service departments. The main aims were to improve both the quality and the efficiency of the work, and therefore cost-control and results have become more important. The “new KPN” reorganization, with the inherent changes in the work processes, reduction in the work content and shifting of sections to other areas has caused considerable friction. Moreover, an increase in telecommunication and greater competition has increased the pressure on the organization.

## References

1. Statistics Netherlands. Arbeid en sociale zekerheid [Labour and social security]. Heerlen/Voorburg, The Netherlands. Available: <http://statline.cbs.nl/statweb/>. Accessed: 02 July 2009.

